State of Affairs By Clayton Fritchey

JFK, LBJ and the War

Washington—Fifty years from today, when the 100th birthday of John F. Kennedy is celebrated, the historians may still be debating what would have happened in Vietnam if he had lived. Even so, the weight of the evidence, as it has gradually accumulated since Nov. 22, 1963, is against the Johnson administration's contention that it is merely doing what Kennedy would have done.

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In discussing Vietnam at Stanford University, Vice President Humphrey said, "If John F. Kennedy were alive today, he would be doing exactly what the Johnson administration is doing at this very hour." And Johnson himself is quoted as saying, "I didn't start this. I inherited it . . . Just before Dallas, Kennedy told me that we were going to have to fight in South Vietnam, not just advise . . . Now, is it going to be said that I let him down?"

No, that is not going to be said, but it is going to be said that most of the evidence that has surfaced since the assassination strongly suggests that at the time of his death the martyred President was disgusted with the Vietnam situation and was determined to limit the U.S. commitment there.

On the basis of testimony from a number of officials who served under both Kennedy and Johnson, and who were close to the Southeast Asian problem, it now seems reasonable to conclude that Kennedy went through three phases in Vietnam. First, he was dubious about betting any blue chips on the struggle there; then, partly out of domestic political consideration, he temporized and somewhat enlarged the U.S. commitment; but finally, in the months before his death, he soured on the war and made it clear that the U.S. would not take it over.

The assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs at the time of the assassination was Roger Hilsman. He continued in that capacity for a period under Johnson. Earlier he had served as director of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research. His knowledge of U.S. policy in Vietnam under both Kennedy and Johnson is inclusive and intimate, and some of it is about to be made public.

In an absorbing new book, "To Move a Nation," soon to be published by Doubleday, Hilsman reveals for the first time that his reason for resigning in 1964 was his conviction that Johnson was planning to ditch the Kennedy policy in favor of a "military solution."

Kennedy, he says, "made it abundantly clear to me on more than one occasion that what he most wanted to avoid was turning Vietnam into an American war. He was skeptical of a policy of escalation and of the effectiveness of an air attack on North Vietnam." He quotes one of Kennedy's last statements on the conflict (Sept. 2, 1963): "In the final analysis it is their war. They are the ones who have to win it or lose it. We can help them; we can give them equipment; we can send our men out there as advisers; but they have to win it . . "

After Kennedy's death, Hilsman discloses, the military stepped up the "pressure" for bombing North Vietnam. He says the chief of the Air Force, Gen. LeMay, put it this way: "We are swatting flies when we should be going after the manure pile." The Pentagon and the CIA, he reports, also pressed for aerial escalation.

Hilsman says that to Averell Harriman, then under secretary of state, and Michael Forrestal, then a Vietnam specialist on the White House staff, and himself, "the conclusion seemed obvious. If we raised the ante by bombing the North, the North Vietnamese would respond by introducing regular North Vietnamese battalions into the South. We would be no better off than before and perhaps worse, and we would be paying the international political costs for nothing."

The Hilsman history probably will not be the final word on the matter, but it makes it hard to believe that the Vietnam situation would be the same if Kennedy had lived.